

Keynote speech at National Museum of  
Civil War Medicine Conference, Hood College,  
Frederick, MD, 5 August 2000.



Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

# *The History of the U.S. Navy Hospital Ship*

Vice Admiral Richard Nelson  
Navy Surgeon General

Good Morning. It's a pleasure to be here with you at the Eighth Annual Conference on Civil War Medicine. I was glad to hear that this year's theme was going to be military medicine. It gives me a chance to get outside of the beltway and speak about a topic I love – Navy Medicine.

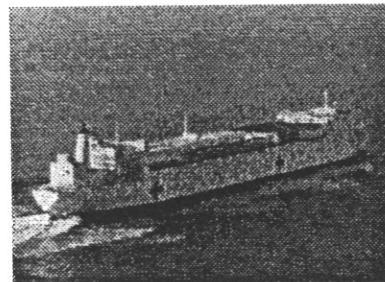
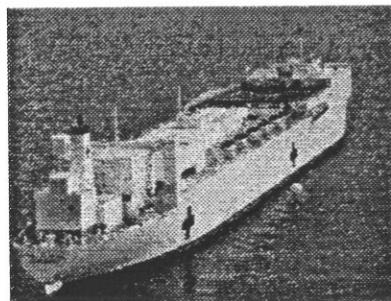
Let me assert right up front, I'm a bit intimidated by the line-up of experts scheduled to present and by the congregation of knowledge assembled in this room.

I'm by no means an expert on Naval Medical history the history of hospital ships, but I would like to share with you this morning how today's hospital ships have evolved from the courage, commitment and fortitude of our forefathers.



### History of the Hospital ship

**USS Mercy (AH 19)**



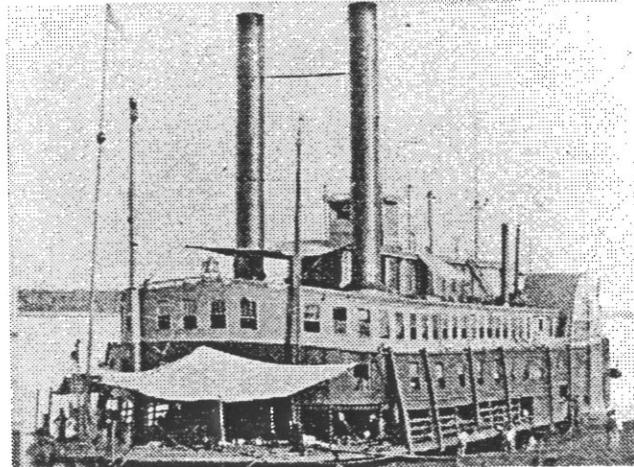
**USS Comfort (AH 20)**

The role of Navy Hospital ships has changed dramatically since they were first used as floating ambulances. Today, USNS MERCY and USNS COMFORT boast state of the art technology that enables the men and women of Navy Medicine to provide acute medical and surgical care in direct support of amphibious operations and forward deployed naval units as well as providing humanitarian assistance and disaster relief throughout the world, when called upon.

But let's return to the beginning. Interestingly, U.S. Navy hospital ships trace their beginnings to the Civil War. The forerunner of our modern havens of mercy was the Navy's first hospital ship, USS RED ROVER.



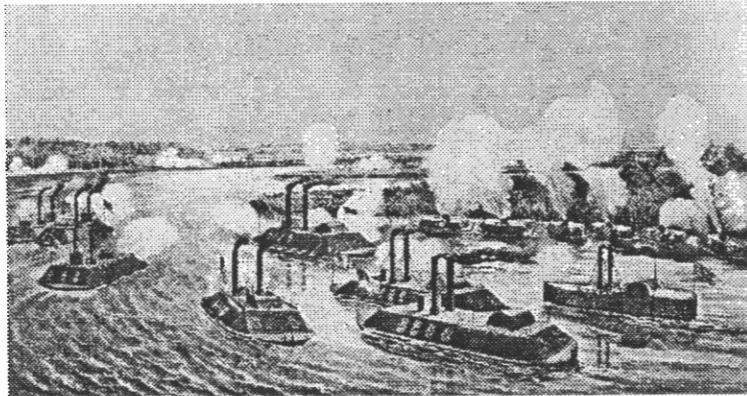
## ***USS Red Rover***



The RED ROVER was originally an old commercial side-wheel steamer that was purchased by the Confederacy in October 1861. She served as a floating barracks and accommodation ship for the CSS NEW ORLEANS.



## History of the Hospital ship

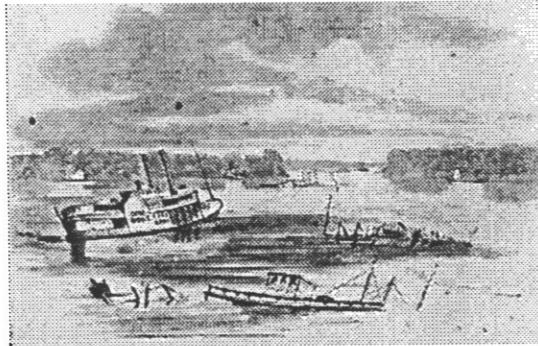


### **The bombardment and capture of Island No. 10**

In March 1862, RED ROVER made her way up the Mississippi River as far as Island Number 10 near New Madrid, Missouri, where she assisted in the blockade of the Union Army's Western Gunboat Flotilla. Although the NEW ORLEANS was jarred by explosions of shells, she was unharmed. RED ROVER, however, was put out of action by a piece of shell that cut through all her decks to her bottom.



### History of the Hospital ship



**RED ROVER  
was run aground  
to avoid sinking**

To avoid sinking, she was run aground and then abandoned. When the island fell to Union forces on April 7<sup>th</sup>, RED ROVER was seized by the Union gunboat MOUND CITY. Temporary repairs were made and she sailed up river to St. Louis, Missouri, where she was fitted up as a fully equipped hospital ship.



### History of the Hospital ship



Rover's original Medical Department



George Bixby  
Senior Surgeon

On 10 June 1862, RED ROVER was ready for service as part of the Western Flotilla and Assistant Surgeon George H. Bixby became her first Surgeon in Charge. RED ROVER augmented limited Union medical facilities and evacuated stricken personnel from forward areas. She also eased the problems of transportation and delivery of medical supplies.



## ***Complete Medical Facility***

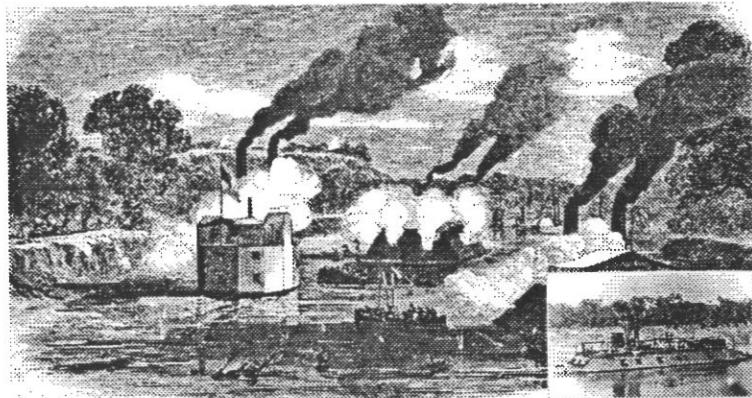
- **300-ton volume icebox**
- **Two water closets per deck**
- **Elevators**
- **Separate operating room**
- **Two galleys**
- **Laundry**

Sanitation and comfort were paramount in her conversion. The 786-ton side-wheeler boasted an icebox that could hold 300 tons of ice, two water closets on every deck and elevators to carry the sick and injured between decks. A separate and fully equipped operating room was installed and a galley was put below, providing separate kitchen facilities for the patients. The cabin aft was opened for better air circulation and an additional steam boiler was added for laundry purposes. Gauze blinds were used to keep out smoke and cinders from the convalescents' berth deck.

Enough supplies were taken aboard for her crew and 200 patients for three months, and on her second day of service she received her first patient -- a cholera victim.



## *Battle at St. Charles*

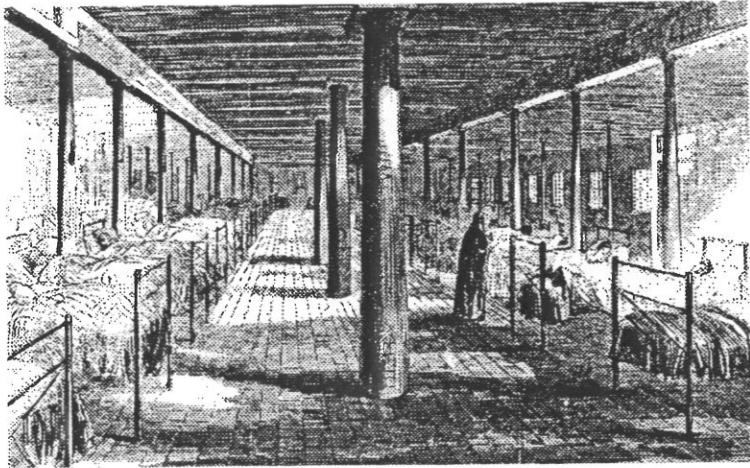


**Inset: USS Mound City**

Ironically, the first serious casualties brought aboard RED ROVER were those of her previous captors, the men assigned to USS MOUND CITY. MOUND CITY exploded during an engagement with Confederate batteries at St. Charles, Arkansas.



### History of the Hospital ship



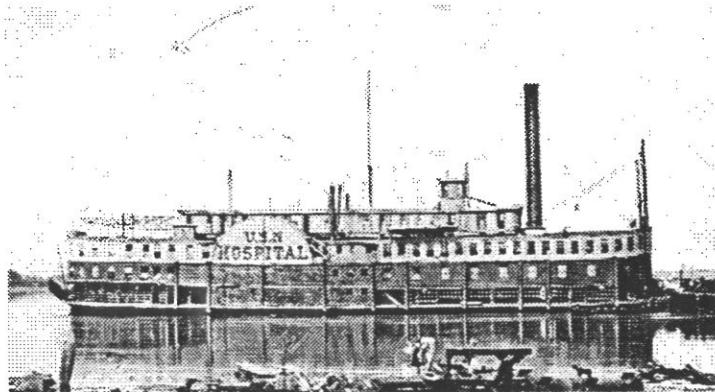
**135 MOUND CITY casualties were  
Red Rover's first war casualties**

Casualties amounted to 135 out of a complement of 175. RED ROVER took on the casualties at Memphis and transported them to less crowded hospitals.



## History of the Hospital ship

### **USS Red Rover**



In September 1862, RED ROVER and the vessels of the Western Flotilla were purchased by the U.S. Navy and became a part of the Mississippi Squadron. Her complement was 47, while her medical department was initially about 30. Of that number, three were Sisters of the Order of the Holy Cross. Later joined by a fourth member of their order and assisted by lay nurses' aides, they were the forerunners of the Navy Nurse Corps.

Throughout her service, RED ROVER cared for the sick and wounded and supplemented her medical support of Union forces by provisioning other ships of the squadron with ice and fresh meat. She also provided burial details and sent medical personnel ashore when and where needed.

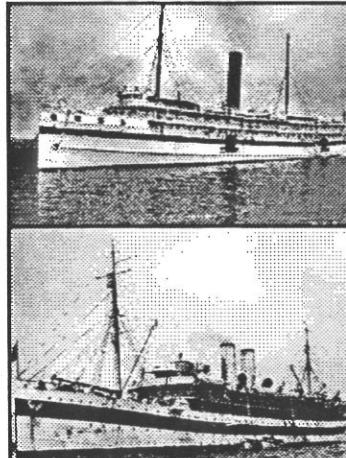
As the War Between the States drew to a close, so did the need for the RED ROVER and she was removed from service November 17, 1865. When finally decommissioned and sold at public auction, the ship's log showed 2,947 patients treated in three years.



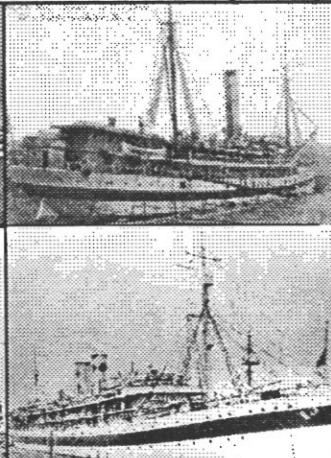
### History of the Hospital ship

## World War I

USS Relief



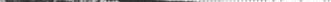
USS Solace (AH 2)



USS Comfort (AH 3)



USS Mercy (AH 4)



Remembering the success of the RED ROVER, the U.S. Navy later made more extensive use of hospital ships. USS RELIEF, the first ship of that name, was a converted passenger steamer, and was used by the Army as a floating ambulance. In 1902, The Navy acquired RELIEF from the Army, but she lay idle until 1908 while factions within the Navy argued over whether the ship should be commanded by a line officer or a medical officer. It was feared that hospital ships could lose protected Geneva Convention status if a line officer was in command.

That view prevailed, and in 1908 the 195-bed RELIEF joined the Great White Fleet at Megdalena Bay, Mexico, under the command of Surgeon Charles F. Stokes, inventor of the stokes litter and later Surgeon General of the Navy.

The Navy also transformed the passenger steamer SS CREOLE into the 200-bed hospital ship USS SOLACE. Through accelerated wartime efforts, the ship was converted in 16 days for use in World War I.

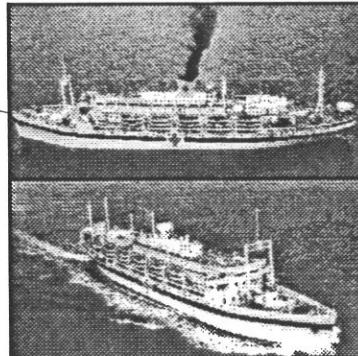
In the final months of the war, two more hospital ships, USS COMFORT and USS MERCY joined USS SOLACE in the Atlantic Fleet. With a combined total of 700 beds, COMFORT and MERCY brought back more than 3,600 casualties from Europe between November 1918 and March 1919.



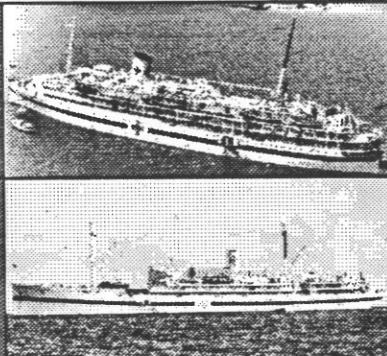
## History of the Hospital ship

### World War II

USS Relief (AH 1)



USS Solace (AH 5)



USS Comfort (AH 6)



USS Mercy (AH 8)



*Comfort*

*Solace*

*Relief*

Lessons learned from hospital ship operations in World War I were applied in the construction of the second USS RELIEF, the first U.S. Navy ship originally designed and built as a hospital ship. When commissioned December 28, 1920, it was the largest and most sophisticated Navy medical facility afloat. RELIEF was manned by 44 medical officers and 331 hospital corpsmen. It had space for 500 patients and offered all the facilities of a shore-based hospital, including specialists in different branches of medicine. In the relative quiet following World War I, RELIEF sailed with both the Atlantic and Pacific Fleets. The ship followed on combat maneuvers in the Caribbean and on both coasts. The medical staff aboard RELIEF was, by no means, without work. In the first 10 months of 1936, the staff handled 2,027 hospitalized patients for a combined total of 39,903 sick days, 475 major operations, 13,903 laboratory exams, 2,002 X-rays and 5,639 dental exams. The years of peace allowed Navy planners to compare RELIEF's performance with that of its predecessors and draw recommendations on future hospital ship construction. Later, hospital ships incorporated many design improvements, as their war record shows.

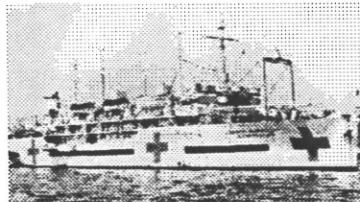
The next hospital ship added to the fleet was the second USS SOLACE. A converted passenger liner, SOLACE was moored at Pearl Harbor on the morning of December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. Within 30 minutes of the Japanese surprise attack, SOLACE was treating casualties. SOLACE and RELIEF cared for Soldiers and Marines wounded in the island campaigns of the South Pacific throughout World War II. As the intensity of fighting increased, so did the need for hospital ships. The second USS MERCY and second USS COMFORT were commissioned in the summer of 1944. They took turns shuttling tens of thousands of wounded out of harms way to various medical facilities and stateside hospitals.

By the time World War II drew to a close, the U.S. Navy had 15 hospital ships in service. After the war casualties were returned home, one by one the active AH force dwindled to two, CONSOLATION in the Atlantic and REPOSE in the Pacific. The two ships participated in exercises or served as station hospitals until they were deactivated in 1949. Just as during the first World War, lessons learned in World War II redefined the mission and design of the hospital ship. Advances in medicine and shipboard technology allowed the ships to become complete care facilities, medical storehouses and sources of expert treatment in all fields of medicine.

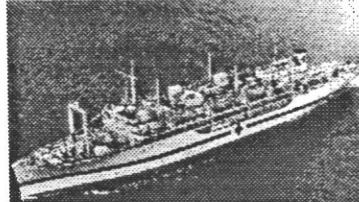


## History of the Hospital ship

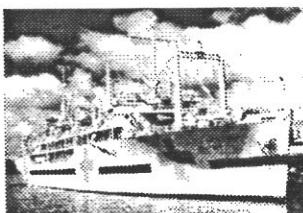
### Korean Conflict



USS Consolation (AH 15)



USS Repose (AH 16)



USS Haven (AH 12)

In June 1950, war broke out in Korea and our hospital ships were again called into service. CONSOLATION was reactivated, remanned, deployed, and receiving patients on station in Pusan, Korea, on August 16, 1950, only two weeks after the first U.S. Marines had landed. By October 1950, REPOSE and HAVEN had joined CONSOLATION, and together provided over 2,500 hospital beds very near the front lines.

In the Korean Conflict, hospital ships were used to the greatest extent in history, and their medical and surgical capabilities were greatly tested. Only one month after arriving in Korea, for example, CONSOLATION was called on to provide medical support for the massive amphibious assault on Inchon.

Battle strategists from Amphibious Force Far East applied all the lessons learned from World War II concerning hospital ship deployment. The ship was brought into the objective area during the assault phase to provide direct casualty care while casualty rates were highest.

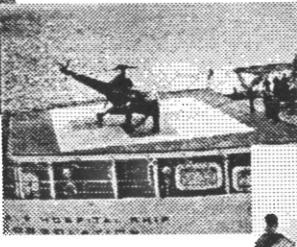
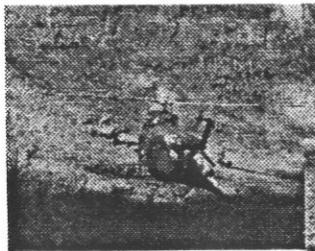
Treated casualties were evacuated from the hospital ships to transports for further transfer to shore-based hospitals to keep the hospital ships on station.

During her 23 days on station, CONSOLATION admitted well over 1,000 patients, yet when she departed she carried only 53 patients, the large majority having returned to duty or transferred to evacuation ships.



## History of the Hospital ship

### *Airlift*



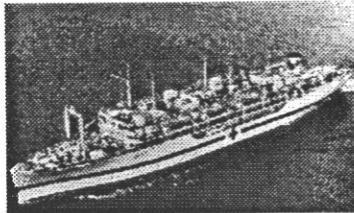
Throughout 1951 the three hospital ships rotated between Pusan, working off the Korean coast, and evacuating patients to Japan. After one of these evacuation runs, CONSOLATION returned to the United States and was fitted with a helicopter platform. December 18, 1951, marked the first use of helicopters to evacuate casualties directly from the battlefield to a hospital ship. REPOSE and HAVEN were later modified with helicopter landing platforms, ushering in a new era in combat medicine.

Following the signing of the Korean armistice in July 1953, the number of hospital ships once again rapidly declined. Only HAVEN remained active while she served as the station hospital at Long Beach, California.

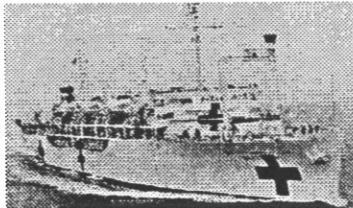


## History of the Hospital ship

### **Vietnam Conflict** USS *Repose* (AH 16)



**USS Sanctuary (AH 17)**



Then in March 1965, U.S. Marines landed in Danang, and within 12 months REPOSE had been brought out of mothballs and was serving off the coast of Vietnam. Her sister ship USS SANCTUARY was also reactivated and reported for duty off Vietnam in April 1967.



## History of the Hospital ship

### *Amphibious Operations*



In Vietnam, aircraft evacuated most casualties. The primary mission of the hospital ship was to provide medical support for combat operations in the northern sector of Vietnam by positioning themselves off the coast to receive helicopter evacuations directly from the battlefield.

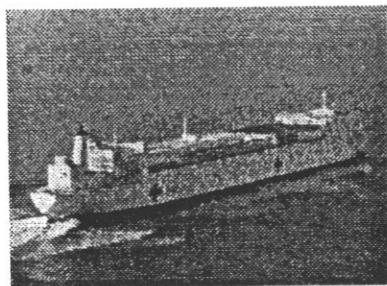
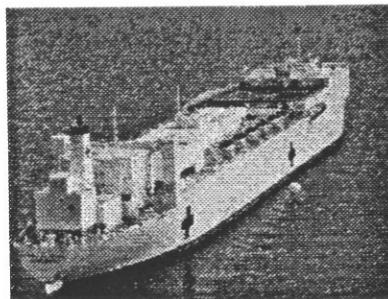
The ships spent four years in Southeast Asia, treating more than 9,000 battle casualties and admitting more than 24,000 patients. Of those, more than 58% were returned to full duty directly from the ship.

REPOSE left Vietnam in March 1970 to be decommissioned. SANCTUARY returned in April 1971 and was decommissioned in 1974.



## History of the Hospital ship

USS Mercy (AH 19)

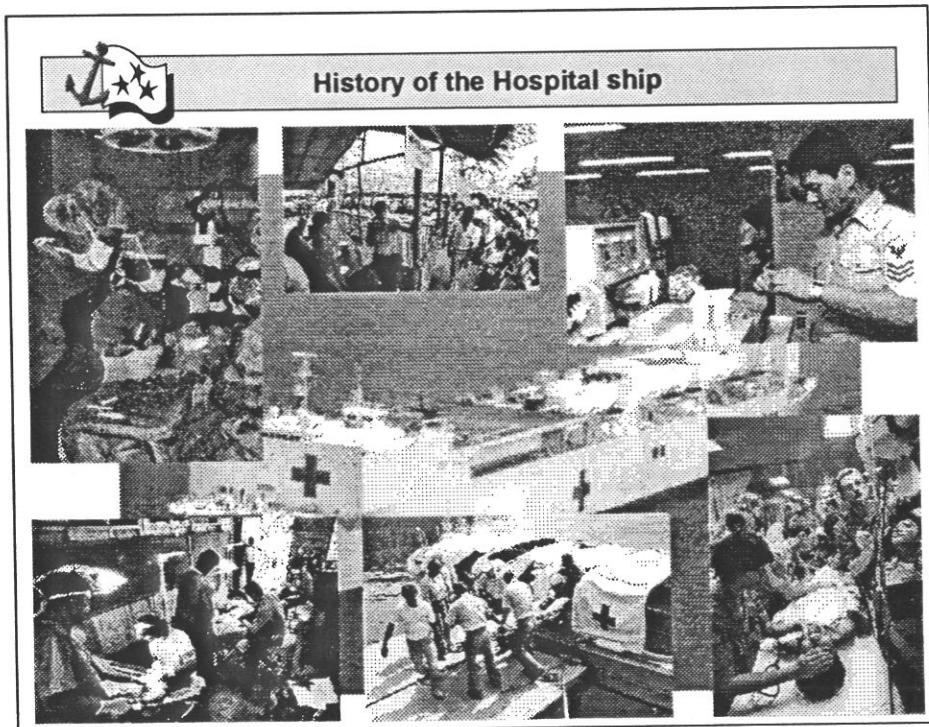


USS Comfort (AH 20)

By the late 70's, military medical planners realized that a deployable medical capability was lacking to support amphibious operations and that shortfall could best be filled by hospital ships.

Consequently, the Chief of Naval Operations approved the conversion of two 106,000-ton, 894-foot supertankers into hospital ships, and in 1983 conversion began. Today's USNS MERCY and USNS COMFORT joined the fleet in 1986 and 1987, respectively and were assigned to the Military Sealift Command.

The MERCY and COMFORT were built as floating hospitals in the truest sense. They are two of the largest trauma facilities in the United States boasting a 1,000-bed capacity, 50 trauma receiving stations, 12 operating rooms, an 80-bed intensive care unit and 16 wards. The ships offer a full spectrum of hospital support services, including a main laboratory to perform all required medical tests, a computerized CAT scan, a pharmacy and a blood bank.



The primary mission of these behemoth hospital ships is to provide a mobile, flexible, rapidly responsive afloat medical capability, to provide acute medical and surgical care in support of amphibious task forces, Marine Corps elements, forward-deployed Navy elements of the fleet, and forward-deployed Army and Air Force elements.

Their secondary mission is to provide mobile surgical hospital and medical services for disaster or humanitarian relief during peacetime military operations.

When required, today's hospital ships can transition to Full Operating Status in five days. The embarked military treatment facility crew may increase to as many as 1,200 Navy personnel depending upon the directed level of activation.



Bureau of Medicine and Surgery

# *The History of the U.S. Navy Hospital Ship*

**Vice Admiral Richard Nelson  
Navy Surgeon General**

As you can see, from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century to today, hospital ships have played an important part of the Navy's response to the medical needs of the military and civilians alike. A far cry from the old RED ROVER, today's Navy hospital ships, are capable of providing high quality, state-of-the-art healthcare but still uphold the same dedication to humanity. They provide "sanctuary, comfort, solace and relief" to Sailors and Marines worldwide -- not just in time of war, but anytime needed.

The military mission of the hospital ship has evolved from floating ambulance to direct medical care during combat operations. Our need for hospital ships has changed throughout our history and it will likely change with military requirements in the future. We will continue to apply lessons learned and re-evaluate the need for the hospital ship in the future. But you can be sure the value of the Navy hospital ship will not be overlooked.

I hope this quick overview of the evolution of our Navy hospital ships has been interesting and informative. It has been a pleasure to address your symposium today.